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Editorial outsource prompts job fears

Nick Tabakoff

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LANDMARK plans by APN News & Media to outsource most of the editorial production of its New Zealand newspapers will herald the start of broader changes in media employment practices, according to the company handling the APN proposal.

Bruce Davidson, the managing director of Pagemasters, the agency proposing to handle the bulk of APN newspapers' future production, said changes in staffing practices were imminent.

"Technology is now allowing some examination of how these things can be done more efficiently and better," Mr Davidson said.

"As newspapers face financial pressures, with advertising revenues being moved into other platforms, such as the internet, the agency can play a significant role in the health of regional newspapers, in particular."

Mr Davidson's comments come after APN announced last week that New Zealand's flagship newspaper, The New Zealand Herald, and a number of other publications, could outsource up to 70 jobs in sub-editing and newspaper design.

At this point it is understood that rival publisher Fairfax Media has no similar plans.

APN suggested some of the staff who lost jobs could be recruited by Pagemasters, which was setting up a new production operation in Auckland. But there are growing fears any staff re-employed may face worse pay and conditions.

One Pagemasters staff member based in Melbourne said yesterday that many staff had until last year been paid on clerks' awards, despite performing some sub-editing functions. While no longer classified as a clerk, the source continues to be classified as something other than a journalist and is paid \$40,000 a year - often for long work hours.

While Mr Davidson agreed that many staff had previously been classified as clerks, staff had ultimately been paid "an average 7 per cent pay increase, and guaranteed CPI increases for (the) next three years".

He added that the local journalists' union, the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance, "recommended they accept the agreement".

While some Melbourne production staff are employed as journalists, many are paid at much lower rates than equivalent journalists in other metropolitan newsrooms. It is understood Pagemasters' highest-paid production staff earn about \$70,000 a year, including shift and weekend work. However, many other production staff at APN are on much lower pay, despite being paid as journalists.

Production staff in APN's New Zealand newspapers fear any moves to re-employ them will be on lower than current rates, with suggestions the new operation will not pay any penalty rates. One APN NZ newspaper insider said last night that while there was a general belief among staff that penalties and shift penalties would go, "it's still completely up in the air".

Mr Davidson has confirmed it is already doing work for APN in Australia. "We do provide editorial pages to the APN group in northern NSW and southern Queensland."

Pagemasters is now packaging pages for the Monday sports section of the daily publications in the APN group in Australia, using copy provided by its parent company, AAP. It also produces a world news digest and a national page for APN dailies.

Mr Davidson's sentiments on outsourcing are closely matched by those of APN's major shareholder, Tony O'Reilly, who was recently quoted as saying: "With the exception of the magic of writing and editing news, almost every other function, except printing, is location-indifferent. No reader knows where the page is made up."

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